



Taronga Zoo Break Out

This is a story about some animals that lived in a zoo called Taronga which is in Guringai country. Most of these animals came from different nations that were all over the land that is now called Australia. All the animals would dream about the time when they could return to their own country, hear the stories from the elders, learn the laws, know the ways of their land. At night when all the people were gone they would gather in their language groups and talk about the old ways, the good ways, when there were no fences and captivity. One group of animals were from the Wonnaruah nation and had their own names in the language. A willy wag tail or didijiri, the emu or kungkurung, the snake or ta nipa tang, the eagle or ka-wul, the echidna or kuntji kukan, the platypus or pikan and some ants or yunrring that were nearly always too busy to stop and talk. Always the talk would turn to their dreams and of the country that they all wished to return to.

All of them thought about escaping from time to time. The same idea would come to each of them sooner or later: 'The trouble is, I'm just not getting anywhere, stuck in here! I'd really like to make something of my life, do something different, see something different, experience something different... learn something new... sometime. My dream is to return home and make a difference to my people, to show them how to achieve their goals and live out their dreams.'

Some of them would mumble these thoughts aloud to themselves, but every time that happened the wind would get up and whistle and snap through the telegraph wires and sing a sad note, which always seemed to be saying, "In your dreams, my old buddy, in your dreams...dreams...dreams.."

One cold winter's night Willy Wagtail was sitting on the fallen gum tree near the pond, talking to Snake about what he could imagine was beyond the zoo gate. He could imagine what home must be like and would tell them stories of what he thought they would all be doing.



He was full of dreams, was Willy Wagtail. He was always coming up with new ideas. He sort of kept himself happy by just telling the others what imagining was like, what it would be like outside, flying free and feeling the wind beneath his wings, taking him wherever he wanted to go. He could talk, that bird, make up stories, think of things... and he had never, ever, in his whole life, said the same thing twice!

Willy's chatter about his wild ideas made the snake think all the more about how he wished he could get out and return to his home. The Snake's mum had told him,



when he was no more than a tiny twister, not to worry about anything, because if he was ever in a tight corner he would learn to wriggle out of it and shed his skin. That way he would grow bigger and stronger and one day he would return home and be able to eat things so big..... all in one gulp. That was how Snake sort of kept himself happy: not thinking about the biggest lunch in the world, but by believing that he would

always grow and change and learn so that, one day, he would find a way out of this place. He watched with a sigh as the last children left the enclosure, the new warden turned his key in the lock and the floodlights went out, one by one.

“What’s the matter, eh?”

The Emu was looking at Snake, all curled up in his corner. Emu just *needed* to know what was going on in his head. ‘No! Don’t just curl up! What’s the matter with you? Why are you looking so sad? Tell me!’

Once Emu had asked a question – and, boy did he ask questions! – he just wouldn’t let it drop till he knew the answer. It was unusual for someone to ask so many questions. Snake didn’t know anyone else quite so curious.



He slid his beak under Snake’s head and lifted him up until he was looking right into his eyes. Snake thought this was quite rude. You shouldn’t look at people straight in the eyes, well that is how he was taught. ‘Well? What’s going on?’ asked Emu again.

Snake told Emu about Willy Wagtail’s dreams and how they made him think of his own country about what his mother had told him about his land, about how sure he was he would grow and learn and everything would change, one day, but he didn’t know how. He didn’t tell him about wanting to swallow the biggest thing he could find for his lunch. Emu listened intently. He was always fascinated, by everything, but he wanted answers. ‘What do you mean, you don’t know how?’ He peered, wonderingly into Snake’s eyes. ‘We gotta find out how. That’s how!’

‘Yes.’ Snake nodded slowly, then stopped. ‘But how?’

‘What d’ya mean, “How?”?’

‘How do you find out how?’

Suddenly found himself asking questions, just like Emu. Emu looked at Snake with the sort of look that made Snake feel he must have missed something stupidly obvious.

“Well, you start by asking questions, just like you started to do then” replied the Emu. “That’s what I do! You don’t find out things unless you ask questions!” It’s OK to ask questions sometimes, especially when you are learning and want to find out something that you don’t know. That’s when it is OK to ask questions.

Snake saw the point. He thought he could have a go at that, but he needed a bit of help to get started. ‘OK then so I will ask a question like “How do I get out of this place?”?’

He looked at Emu for a reply, but Emu was just staring back at him in silence until, after several seconds, he just said, ‘Go on!’

‘Go on where?’

‘OK!’ said Emu with a quick sigh. ‘Listen to me.’

‘OK!’ said Snake.

‘Do you want to get out of this place?’

‘You know I do! I’ve told you that!’

‘Why?’

‘So I can grow and learn and see new things and grow and change and expand my mind and help my mob find food and water when it is scarce, be a good leader if I am chosen.’

‘Why?’ interrupted Emu.

‘Because that’s what I do. That’s what I’m good at, but there’s not much chance of it in here.’

‘Who can help you?’ said Emu.

‘What?’ said Snake.

‘Has anyone got out before?’

‘I dunno...’

‘How did they do it? What tools do you need? What do you need to know? Who can you ask? When would be the best time of day? What’s the security like? When does it change? What’s the weak point? What do you need to take with you? Does anyone else want to come? What can they bring to the party?’

“Goodness !”said Snake admiringly. “What a lot of questions, I wish I could do that sometimes when I don’t know an answer.”

‘The answer’s “Yes!” by the way.

‘What?’

‘The answer’s “Yes!” There is a fella wants to come too. Me!’

‘Make that two!’ came a quiet, squeaky voice from just behind them that made Emu jump.

‘Ouch!’ shouted Emu. He had landed on Echidna.



One by one many of the animals started to draw nearer. As the animals rearranged themselves beside the fallen gum tree so that they could go on talking without being prickled by Echidna, Snake looked up for a moment and saw that the Eagle, high on a perch above, was watching them with her piercing eye and seemed to be listening to everything they were saying. At that very moment, she glanced up at the full moon and nodded to one of her companions, who dropped off the perch and glided away out of sight.

‘I can help you to achieve your dream,’ Echidna started speaking, slowly and firmly. ‘Follow my example and you’ll get there in the end. Lots of people fail because they give up before they’ve even begun. They allow themselves to think that they are not good enough, or clever enough, or brave enough to make their dream come true. They do not realise that their mentors, the ones they look up to, were no different from them when they set out.’ She shuffled herself a little deeper into the red dirt and went on. ‘When the going gets tough, that’s just how I like it. Nothing knocks me off my path. If I’m in danger, I can dig myself down into the ground and put my spikes up so that’s all they can see of me. And they always run out of patience before I do. Patience is my second name! I do patience! So I always get there in the end’.

For the first time since Willy Wagtail told him about his dreams, Snake felt a stirring of excitement wriggle all the way down his coils. He was beginning to get it. He started to feel himself grow and change. He was already learning to ask questions and be curious, like Emu. Now he was learning how important it is to be patient and stick at things, like Echidna. His skin felt tight, all of a sudden.

At the same moment, there was a slap on the water beside them and Platypus came to the surface, flicked the water off her beak and opened her eyes. ‘I had a feeling that something was going on,’ she said. ‘I sensed it in my beak!’

‘That’s clever of you!’ said Snake.

‘Typical!’ said Echidna.

‘How?’ said Emu.



‘Oh, I just put two and two together, if you see what I mean,’ the Platypus replied, airily. ‘I pick things up, here and there, you know. I have a nose for meaning.’

‘You mean a beak!’ chipped in Emu, but Platypus ignored him.

‘I understand what happens when you listen to Willy Wagtail and his dreams and I know it matters. Imagination is like a window to another world. It sets you off, like a tunnel to the outside. Once you are moving, you just follow your beak.’

‘Then Emu, with his busy, enquiring little mind gets going and you, Echidna: you and your determination! It’s not difficult to put all that together and make sense of it. Change is coming! I can see it a mile off. Just look at your skin, Snake! You’re ready to grow out of this place, aren’t you?’

‘You hear that?’ chirped Willy Wagtail, who was fluttering back and forth. ‘Snake’s got a new motto: “Growing Places!”’

‘Nice one, Willy!’ Platypus went on. ‘I’ll come with you, if you’ll have me. I’ll help you to make sense of all this. I connect everything up in my head, you see, like I do with my tunnels.’ She rubbed her beak, briefly. ‘What’s going on inside, what’s going on outside... it’s all connected. Once you understand that, you understand everything!’

Snake looked at her with amazement. What a clever, knowing animal she was. He wondered if he could learn this ability to relate everything to everything else so it all made sense.

‘I think you’ll find that’s why Eagle has sent the ants to join us,’ Platypus nodded in the direction of the red mound over by the glass wall and, sure enough, two scout ants appeared along the bank and scurried up and on to the silver bark of the gum tree, which had now become a very special meeting point.



‘Hi, everyone!’ the first ant whispered, so all the animals moved a little closer. Willy Wagtail hopped down on to a lower branch and used a curled up gum tree leaf as an ear-trumpet so he would not miss a single word.

‘We are calling all the animals together at Eagle’s command,’ the ants said together. ‘We know how important teamwork is. We know how to work on our own and together for the good of our colony. That is why Eagle asked us to gather you. Every one of you has a special gift and each of you will have your own part to play which is special and only you can do it. But we’ve also got to work together, listen, learn from each other, contribute our own ideas and draw strength from the power of the group.’ Snake looked around and became aware of the presence of all the animals in the zoo, like shadows, encircling the fallen gum tree by the man made pond.

A shape flashed across the light of the moon and its shadow fell momentarily on the scene. All the animals fell silent. The Eagle landed, a little higher up the leaning gum tree, spread her wings magnificently and folded them away with a shake of her feathers. No one spoke. They were all eager to hear what the Eagle was going to say.



‘The moment has arrived. We have anticipated it. Now, everything is in place. Under the full moon, I have called you together to combine your strengths, summon the power of all your learning and fulfil your dream of returning home to your country. I have planned for this night. I see everything, from the smallest ant to the whole zoo, the city and the vast bush, stretching out West as far as the eye can see. I see each moment: how it arrived on the wings of the past and how it will launch into the great sky of the future. Learn from me as you have learned from each other. I give you your purpose, your direction, your focus and, most important of all, your readiness to accept your responsibility to yourself to achieve your dream.’

All the animals breathed a deep breath of the midnight air and solemnly vowed to accept their responsibility to themselves and the group. It was a bit hard to understand what eagle was exactly saying but once they had thought about it for a little while and talked quietly to each other about what eagle meant, they knew that, before the night was over, if they all played their part, they would be free.

In one hour, the plan was hatched and the break out from Taronga had begun. They marvelled at the way everything came together through their combined gifts: Willy Wagtail’s creativity, when he came up with new and surprising ideas; Emu’s curiosity, to question every detail and check it out; Platypus’s meaning making, to make sure that every part of the plan fitted together and made sense and Echidna’s resilience, to keep them going even though it was late and most of them were tempted at least once or twice just to let their eyes close and nod off to sleep. The ants moved amongst them, encouraging them all to listen and learn together. The Eagle spoke only occasionally: her planning had brought them together in the first place, but her few contributions were perfectly judged to keep the animals focussed on the task ahead of them. And Snake? Well he just swelled with pride and grinned at everyone, giving them the confidence they needed, to know they were definitely heading along the right path to home.

The story of the break out from Taronga Zoo became famous throughout the animal world, to be told and retold for generations to come: how the Eagle had foreseen that, one day, a new warden would arrive and make a fatal mistake; how she had spotted that warden’s keys and money placed on the table by the open window every night and decided she could afford to wait for the full moon; how Emu, whose job was to grab the keys in his beak, had nearly blown the whole plan when he saw his reflection in a fifty cents piece and attracted the warden’s attention by insisting on an explanation (‘Does that mean I’ll already be famous when we get out?’ was the fatal line), before clamping his beak shut just before it was too late; how Eagle had used her razor sharp claws to make a hole in the bird cage netting, and her beak to snap the warden’s telephone wires (at Willy Wagtail’s suggestion); how the ants had marched up the gum tree and (also at Willy’s suggestion) continued all along Snake to get to the other side of the glass wall, where they started to mine a hole under the main fence; how the Platypus had finished their work, making a permanent connection between the inside and the outside and, gloriously and finally, how Echidna, being the slowest and last to leave, had hidden in the dirt of the road outside and punctured the tyres of the warden’s bicycle as he pedalled for help.

No one really knows how long the animals took to make it back to Wonnaruah country but when they arrived they began to get busy and learnt how to live out their dreams, by following the knowledge that was there waiting for them, as old as the

land itself. They understood that to achieve your goals you must become strong in your culture and bring it into your learning so that you can make sense of the path to success. They understood that they must encourage one another to be successful and live out new dreams.

One day, they got together again and agreed that they should leave the bush. One dream had been fulfilled. The city children had been sad to lose them. The bush would always be there when they needed to go back to it. They had learned how to travel. They had all survived crossing the F3 the busiest road in their world, to get back to country. It had taken skill, determination and courage to do it but together they had made it, and had learnt together how to do it.

Now, they knew they would go on learning for the rest of their lives. They would never go back to the zoo. They had returned home to the Hunter Valley, home to the Wonnaruah people, their home. Today the animals are working around the schools of the Singleton area, helping children and students to grow and change by passing on their truths and being everlasting symbols of what they discovered on their adventure.

On a winter's night, in the light of a full moon, a silver snake skin lay glistening on the ground, near a billabong beside a fallen gum tree. The wind gets up and whistles and snaps through the telegraph wires, singing a brave note in Wonnarua language, which seems to be saying, "Follow your dreams buddy! Follow your dreams...dreams...dreams"



Written by the Indigenous students of Singleton High School for the school Community in Singleton, New South Wales, with support from Tim Small, Bristol, UK and Deirdre Heitmeyer, Jennifer Campbell and Narelle McCormack of the Ka-Wul Indigenous Education Centre

Ratified by the Wonnaruah elders.

Illustrations by Kerry-Anne at Black Butterfly Designs